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New Paris Intelligence Chief Charges Plot Against Agency

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PARIS, Sept. 27 — The new head of France's intelligence agency said tonight that he had discovered a "malicious operation" to destroy the agency.

"I must tell you," said the director, Gen. René Imbot, "that to my deep stupefaction I have discovered, and I weigh my words carefully, a veritably malicious operation to destabilize our secret services — I would even say, to destroy our secret services."

The Government has admitted that the agents of the intelligence service, acting on orders, were responsible for sinking an antinuclear protest ship in New Zealand. The case has caused a political scandal here.

General Imbot's statement tonight, while accusing no specific people or groups of acting against the agency, seemed to represent a new twist to the affair. The case began when the Rainbow Warrior, a ship belonging to the environmentalist group Greenpeace, was sunk by a bomb in Auckland Harbor on July 10. The ship was to have led a protest flotilla against French nuclear testing in the Pacific.

Attempt to Fix Responsibility

Only two days ago, Prime Minister Laurent Fabius had apparently tried to end the crisis by fixing ultimate political responsibility on Charles Hernu, who resigned last week as Defense Minister. But General Imbot, in raising allegations of a plot against the intelligence agency, indicated the Greenpeace case was not closed.

General Imbot, speaking tonight on French television, said earlier information from the intelligence agency about the sinking had been "lies."

"I have found people who had to be punished," he said. "I have cut off the rotten branches. What I mean is that from now on all information that anyone claims to have or to have received from the service is a lie, because I have sealed off the service."

General Imbot was named to head the intelligence agency on Wednesday after the previous director, Adm. Pierre Lacoste, was dismissed for refusing to answer questions from the Defense Ministry about the sinking.

Meanwhile, five members of the French armed forces, including the deputy head of the intelligence agency's counterespionage division, have been formally charged with divulging secret information about the affair.

Speculation on the arrest of the men has centered on the possibility that they gave information to the press to embarrass the Socialist Government.

But General Imbot, asked tonight if the five arrested men were responsible for the purported destabilization effort, said: "No, others had charge of rotten branches, and I made allusion to that. I have cut the rotten branches."

While General Imbot's declaration contained no details or precise charges, it was similar in tone to earlier references to "malignancies" or unanswered questions in the affair.

In a denial of involvement in the sinking, read to journalists the day before he resigned as Defense Minister, Mr. Hernu said, "There is a malignancy in this affair, in these dark areas."

Striking a similarly dark note, Prime Minister Fabius, in a television statement on Wednesday night, spoke of the possibility that someone had "sabotaged the sabotage," a reference to speculation that the operation against the Greenpeace ship had been revealed in advance by unknown agents.

In his declaration tonight, General Imbot refused to answer a question about the possible involvement of foreign agents in a plot to destabilize the intelligence service.

'They Know What I Mean'

His declaration seemed in part a kind of public order to the military. "All those who have served with me," he said, "those officers and noncommissioned officers who will hear me this evening, when I say I have sealed off the service, they know what I mean."

General Imbot said he would move forward in reorganizing the agency "because it would be unthinkable for our country, which is one of the five great nuclear powers of the world, to be deprived of its secret services, which are absolutely essential if our country is to keep its place in the world."